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22 October 1980

MEMORANDUM

Situation in Ethiopia and Somalia

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Ethiopia-Eritrea

The Eritrean insurgents, beset by factional disputes, have evolved into three distinct groups. The largest of these, with 16,000 troops, is the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a marxist, Christian-dominated organization. A second major group is the Muslim-dominated Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), whose moderate and ideologically diverse leadership commands an estimated 12,000 troops. A third faction, calling itself the ELF/PLF, is a conservative Muslim group whose troops, numbering less than 4,000, are based mainly in Sudan.

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The insurgent movement has experienced rapid growth during the past six years, a result of the harsh policies pursued by Ethiopia's military government since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. But popular support for Eritrean secession mirrors the disunity, along ideological and personality lines, plaguing the insurgents themselves. Factionalism is further complicated by the fact that the Eritrean people are half Christian and half Muslim, and disputes recurrently form along religious lines. In the field, relations between the two larger guerrilla groups are at an all time low, resulting in frequent outbreaks of open fighting. The majority of Eritrean guerrilla leaders and their followers seek independence from Ethiopia, although some might accept federation with Ethiopia under certain conditions.

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Despite their disunity, the insurgents have succeeded in fighting the Ethiopian military to a standstill. Serious problems, however, have denied both sides decisive victory. Poorly led and ill-disciplined government troops have been ineffective in conducting counterinsurgency operations, and only their numerical superiority and their ability to call on artillery and air support have enabled them to secure Eritrea's major population centers. The insurgents, concentrated in the Eritrean countryside, have returned to hit and run tactics against the Ethiopians. For now, neither side appears capable of defeating the other.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Africa Division, Office of Political Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Africa Division, OPA, [redacted]

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Ethiopia recently has expressed some willingness to negotiate with the Eritreans, but there is no indication that Addis Ababa is prepared at this time to make major concessions. Sudan's ongoing efforts to promote talks between the two sides so far have not been accompanied by any appreciable reduction in Khartoum's support for the guerrillas. Sudanese President Nimeiri, who is worried about Ethiopia's political and military intentions, is eager to improve relations with Addis Ababa but for now probably sees his involvement with the Eritreans as the best way of keeping the Ethiopians occupied. [redacted]

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Somalia-Ethiopia

The latest round of fighting in the Ogaden peaked last July when Somalia--after an unsuccessful assault on Wader--withdrew its major regular Army units from the region. Somali officials insist that no regular troops remain in the Ogaden, [redacted]

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The Ethiopian military presently is conducting sweep operations against Somali guerrillas in the northern Ogaden and is staging periodic air and ground raids against Somali border towns in the south. Addis Ababa appears to be trying--with some success--to crush Somali guerrilla elements, gain control of the border area, and promote dissension within the Somali government and armed forces. There are no indications at this time that the Ethiopians are preparing for a major military offensive against Somalia. [redacted]

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Somali President Siad, bruised from his military setbacks in the Ogaden, scrambling to avert a serious oil shortage stemming from the Iran-Iraq war, and facing a foreign exchange crunch, nonetheless remains firmly in control. He faces some internal opposition, however, and seemingly spontaneous acts of violence against members of his politically and economically privileged Marehan tribe by members of disadvantaged Somali tribes recently have occurred. [redacted]

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The Ethiopian National Democratic Front (ENDF)

The Ethiopian National Democratic Front, a Christian insurgent group formed in 1978 by disaffected government and military figures, operates primarily in Gonder and probably has no more than a few hundred men under arms. It advocates the overthrow of Addis Ababa's Marxist government but also opposes autonomy for Ethiopia's various separatist movements. The group for now poses no serious threat to the Mengistu regime. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: SITUATION IN ETHIOPIA AND SOMALIA

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